

# Plotinus' Aesthetics: In Defence of the Lifelike

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## Plotinus' Aesthetics

Does Plotinus have an aesthetics and/or a philosophy of art? If we start from a naïve conception of aesthetics as a philosophical discourse on beauty – its nature, our experience of it, our interest in it, our judgements concerning it – the *Enneads* provide ample evidence for an affirmative answer. Plotinus discusses beauty in many contexts, including two treatises explicitly dedicated to it, *On Beauty*, I.6[1], and *On Intelligible Beauty*, V.8[31], and he does so because he considers beauty an essential characteristic of reality and our experience.<sup>1</sup> The importance Plotinus attaches to beauty is indicated by the wide extension he attributes to the term: every object of human experience, including natural things, animals and human beings, technological products, works of art, moral and cognitive practices and their results, can be appreci-

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1. Plotinus' text used is that of Henry & Schwyzer (1964–82), and translations follow, with minor revisions, Armstrong (1966–88).

ated from the point of view of beauty.<sup>2</sup> This usage reflects common ancient Greek linguistic habits, but even the proper philosophical objects of Plotinus' thought (the One, the Intellect, the Soul, or the universe as a whole), which obviously transcend ordinary experience, are approached systematically through their relation to beauty and deployed to provide a metaphysical account of the presence of beauty in the sensible world.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to philosophy of art, the evidence is ambiguous. Although there are no treatises explicitly dedicated to the creation and reception of works of art, Plotinus discusses the function of the artist and the nature of the work of art in many contexts. These brief discussions do not amount to a comprehensive or detailed philosophy of art; moreover, their incidental nature and general tenor, as well as some of their claims, suggest that Plotinus did not attach much significance to art. It is clear that Plotinus, who lived in an age when philosophers could be openly proud of being philosophers, had no problem in sometimes contrasting philosophy as a “serious” (*spoudaia*) pursuit to a conception of artistic activity as producing “toys (*paignia*) not worth much” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].10.18). Yet, even in such contexts, Plotinus situates art firmly within life, since life “does not rest from ceaselessly making beautiful and shapely living toys” (*Enn.* III.2[47].15.32–3) and places art at the same level as any other human activity, because, apart from philosophy, “the rest of humanity is a toy” (*Enn.* III.2[47].15.54–5). I shall revisit this issue, but at present I should indicate that Plotinus' scattered remarks do give us a sense of what he would consider a successful work of art; moreover, by situating artistic creativity within the broader context of the

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2. For the extension of the term “beautiful” (τὸ καλόν), see *Enn.* I.6[1].1 and V.9[5].2 and the brief remarks of Kuisma (2003: 43–5).
  3. Consider, for example, the following typical statement: “And first we must posit beauty which is also the good; from this immediately comes intellect, which is beauty; and soul is given beauty by intellect. Everything else is beautiful by the shaping of soul, the beauties in actions and in ways of life. And soul makes beautiful the bodies which are spoken of as beautiful” (*Enn.* I.6[1].6.25–30).

fundamental theoretical, practical and affective possibilities of human interaction with reality, they offer the outline for a philosophical account of the existence, purpose and value of art.

These observations lead to two further comments about the manner of Plotinus' engagement with beauty and art. The first is that even when dealing with passages that clearly focus on aesthetic issues, one cannot make much sense of them without referring to the metaphysical background they reflect. Plotinus' aesthetics is not a detached account of the relevant experience without explicit philosophical presuppositions, but rather a systematically motivated part of his philosophy, closely integrated with his metaphysics, epistemology and psychology. Accordingly, his views on beauty and art do not aim to describe historically given artistic practices, but are offered in a normative perspective shaped by specific ontological commitments. Moreover, his philosophy as a whole seems characterized by an aesthetic orientation, in a sense that transcends the concrete issue of art. This orientation issues from his fundamental conception of reality as a hierarchy of levels – the One, the Intellect, the Soul, the material world – each of which can be considered as an “image” of the one above, the lower level generated by the higher one as its reflection, striving to become through its own activity like the higher one. The material world (which, properly speaking, does not constitute a distinct ontological level but is “in the soul”) is grasped as the image of an intelligible model generated through the productive activity of the Soul. As a result, aesthetically pregnant notions like creation, imagination, imitation or presentation perform crucial functions in wider contexts, in ways that often defy the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical. Plotinus' reliance on the paradigm of art for the articulation of fundamental tenets of his thought indicates that his influence on the tradition of aesthetics may not just derive from his explicit discussions of aesthetic issues, but could be the result of an appropriation of its overall content.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Plotinus has been credited with an innovative and more attractive interpretation of the role of art and artists than his predecessors, especially Plato.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is thought to have influenced or inspired subsequent theories of art and artistic practices: links between Plotinus' aesthetics and various forms of art have been recurrently explored in connection with the art of late antiquity, the Byzantine period, the Renaissance, or even contemporary trends like abstract or conceptual art.<sup>5</sup> But these remarks also shed some light on the claim that Plotinus did not have an aesthetics in the modern sense of the term, and thus any talk about it would be a misleading anachronism.<sup>6</sup> The claim can be understood in different ways. If by "aesthetics in the modern sense" we understand a project like the contemporary discipline of aesthetics, where the explicit aim is the philosophical discussion of beauty or art with a minimum of general philosophical presuppositions, then it is true that Plotinus does not have an aesthetics, for the same reasons that, say, Kant, Hegel or Nietzsche did not have one either. If by "aesthetics in the modern sense", following Baumgarten's original definition of the term, we understand the study of an object strictly confined within sensory experience, then Plotinus does not have an aesthetics (but, once again, neither do Kant nor Hegel in their engagement with beauty or art). If by "aesthetics in the modern sense" we understand a philosophical examination of art or beauty based on whatever common ideas underlie the work of the thinkers of the

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4. For a concise discussion of this claim, see Rich (1960).

5. Two recent collections of essays that study the influence of Neoplatonic aesthetics are De Girolami Cheney & Hendrix (2004) and Lobsien & Olk (2007); for the late antiquity and Byzantine context, see Walter (1984); for Plotinus' influence on medieval aesthetics, see Grabar (1945); for connections with modern and contemporary art, see Beierwaltes (2002a) and Alexandrakis (2002); for the place of Plotinus in the classical tradition of art conceived as mimesis, see Halliwell (2002: 313–23).

6. See Stern-Gillet (2000: 63 and n. 69 for further references to similar views): "The reason, as I hope to have shown above, is that Plotinus had no aesthetics in the sense in which this term is generally understood since the eighteenth century. It is therefore appropriate to stop looking for an aesthetics in a philosophy that, in all other respects, is richly systematic" (my translation from the French); see also Kuisma (2003: 65–6).

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as a modern conception of subjectivity, or a new understanding of the function of imagination, or the invention of a “system” of arts,<sup>7</sup> then again Plotinus does not have an aesthetics, but in this case one cannot help but share the concern expressed by Stephen Halliwell that,

of all the branches of philosophy, it is only aesthetics, it seems, whose own practitioners are commonly tempted to equate the history of their discipline with the discovery of its supposedly “pure” truths. No approach of this kind would make much sense for, say, the history of metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics, or the pure philosophy of mind, in all of which it seems necessary to acknowledge a history that embraces substantially, even radically, different ways of thinking, rather than making any one set of ideas definitional of the subject itself.  
(2002: II–I2)

In this sense, the claim that Plotinus does have an aesthetics goes against both the contemporary understanding of aesthetics as a separate discipline that can pursue its aims independently of wider philosophical articulations and the tendency to equate aesthetics as such with modern aesthetics. These two points are not independent. If we credit Kant with the definitive philosophical articulation of modern aesthetics, one of its constitutive moments is the radical separation between the claims of the true, the good and the beautiful. Kant articulated this separation from within a comprehensive philosophical system and noted the epistemological and moral implications of the aesthetic domain; nevertheless, it is this articulation that created the possibility for a separate discipline of aesthetics. Plotinus, obviously, does not share this starting point, since for him the true, the good and the beautiful are intimately connected and thus there is a continuum between cognition or theory and practice, whether moral or artistic.<sup>8</sup> But it is important to note that this separation, already questioned by the

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7. For a brief discussion of the origins of modern aesthetics, see Guyer (2004).

8. “For this reason being is longed for because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is lovable because it is being” (V.8[31].9.41–2). There are, of course, certain complications in the relation between the Good (*qua* the One) and the beautiful; see V.5[32].12, VI.7[38].22, and VI.7[38].32.31–4.

German Idealists and Romantics or Nietzsche, may be also historically overcome in the practices that guide artistic creation and reception today, and thus any ‘modern’ aesthetics based on the assumption of autonomous aesthetic values may be already obsolete. As Arthur Danto notes in his 1984 essay on “The End Of Art”,

If we look at the art of our recent past ..., what we see is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art. ... But there is another feature exhibited by these late productions which is that the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness ... [F]or the object in which the artwork consists is so irradiated by theoretical consciousness that the division between object and subject is all but overcome, and it little matters whether art is philosophy in action or philosophy is art in thought. (1986: 111–13)

What is striking about this passage for anyone familiar with Plotinus’ views on art is that it seems to describe equally well both the conditions of a Hegelian end of art (where “end” signifies the closure of a historical period in which art has an important independent function; this is the sense in which Danto offers his description) and the substance of a Plotinian end of art (where “end” stands for the purpose, the *telos*, which art should serve). If, as Danto’s remarks suggest, this is an important problem for art today, Plotinus’ articulation of it, however distant from our modern presuppositions, may still be relevant. The aim of the reflections that follow is to present an overview of Plotinus’ philosophy of art from the point of view of the problem of the relation between theory and practice, or philosophy and art. As we shall see, a promising starting point in this direction, which however has been relatively neglected in the literature, is offered by the notions of “life” and “lifelikeness” which Plotinus seems to accentuate in his account of beauty.

## The Lifelike

A philosophy of art needs to coordinate three related issues: artistic creation, the work of art and aesthetic reception. What distinguishes artistic creation from other forms of human practice? What distinguishes the work of art from other human artefacts? What distinguishes aesthetic experience from other forms of human experience? If the enquiry is embedded within a broader framework of aesthetics, which allows that there are objects of aesthetic experience that are not works of art, then the emphasis shifts to the latter two questions, of which the former needs to be correspondingly broadened: What makes an object appropriate for aesthetic appreciation?<sup>9</sup> These issues can be approached from various perspectives, but what marks the philosophical approach, and this is as true for Plato or Plotinus as it is for Kant or Hegel, is the attempt to elucidate these questions in terms of the interests and objects of philosophy itself.

Plotinus does not think that beauty, which, for him, is what makes an object appropriate for aesthetic appreciation and is thus his central aesthetic category or value, comes into being exclusively through the work of artists. One could claim that his interest is directed primarily at the experience of beautiful objects of any kind and only secondarily at the specific issues raised by artistic creation and works of art.<sup>10</sup> This is true to the extent that the existence of non-artificial beauty, whether sensible or intelligible, and our reaction to it are of special systematic importance for Plotinus' philosophy.<sup>11</sup> However, it would be a mistake to draw a sharp distinction here between

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9. I am assuming here that aesthetics is broader than philosophy of art in the sense outlined above. The relation between the two becomes more complicated if one thinks that the creation and reception of works of art raise issues that transcend the framework of the aesthetic experience of natural objects.

10. Thus, after discussing extensively Plotinus' reflections on art, Kuisma notes: "The foregoing chapters should have substantiated the view that Plotinus was not an enthusiast of art, art criticism, or art theory" (Kuisma 2003: 148).

11. Hence, for example, Plotinus' persistent claim that the universe as a whole, the natural cosmos, is

the natural and the artificial. On the one hand, artistic creation is fully “natural” for Plotinus, because the activity of artists is explicated within the same metaphysical context that accounts for the existence of natural beauty without any radical break between nature and history and, thus, the work of art exists as “naturally” as any other beautiful object. On the other hand, what underlies the existence of any form of beauty is an activity of metaphysical principles that is at least partly to be conceptualized with the help of the paradigm of art, whether that of a craftsman or an artist.<sup>12</sup>

The first question to consider, therefore, concerns the work of art, and in particular the issue of its success and its evaluation: how can we conceive and judge the excellence of a work of art? Obviously, the short response would be in terms of beauty, since the apprehension of beauty is both what initially captivates us and makes us concentrate on the work of art as well as the final purpose of aesthetic experience.<sup>13</sup> We are led, then, to the question of the elucidation of the nature of beauty, and a good starting point is provided by the following passage from the treatise *The Forms and the Good*, VI.7[38]:

So here below also beauty is what illuminates good proportions rather than the good proportions themselves, and this is what is lovable. For why is there more light of beauty on a living face, but only a trace of it on a dead one, even if its flesh and its proportions are not yet wasted away? And are not the more lifelike (*dzōtikōtera*) statues the more

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beautiful (see e.g. *Enn.* II.9[33].16.48–56; III.8[30].11.29–30; V.8[31].8.21–2) is clearly motivated by his philosophical polemics against the Gnostics, regardless of any personal experience that may underlie it.

12. See, among many other passages, *Enn.* II.3[52].18.13–15, where the Intellect is called “δημιουργός” and the cosmic soul “ποιητὴς ἔσχατος”. The extensive presence of the paradigm of art in Plotinus’ work, a legacy from the Platonic *Timaeus* that Plotinus transformed in significant ways, is documented in Ferwerda (1965: 139–58).
13. Beauty is what “attracts the gaze of those who look at something and turns and draws them to it and makes them enjoy the sight” (*Enn.* I.6[1].1.18–19); for a vivid description of the effects of beauty on the soul of the beholder, see *Enn.* I.6[1].4.13–18. Even if one considers the experience of sensible beauty as a merely instrumental step towards the appreciation of intelligible beauty (as e.g. in *Enn.* V.9[5].2.1–10), the experience of the latter, an inseparable aspect of contemplation, is clearly an end in itself.



beautiful ones, even if the others are better proportioned? And is not an uglier living man more beautiful than the man in a statue? (*Enn.* VI.7[38].22.24–32)

The immediate suggestion is that beauty does not depend essentially on any of the factors ordinarily thought to shape the aesthetic reception of an object, such as its symmetry, proportions or, more generally, its sensible form or material qualities. The claim that these factors are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for beauty, since they cannot be considered as its cause or principle, is made by Plotinus in *Enn.* I.6[I] and his arguments in support of it have been discussed in Plotinian scholarship (see Anton 1964; Kuisma 2003: 163–5; Darras-Worms 2007: 123–36). One consideration that Plotinus raises here is that the same body appears sometimes beautiful and sometimes not beautiful, presumably while its structure and composition remain unaffected (*Enn.* I.6[I].I.15–17, 38–40). Under the assumption that these variations in judgement are not entirely due to subjective factors, this fact seems to imply that in beautiful bodies, “being bodies is one thing, their being beautiful is another” (*Enn.* I.6[I].I.16–17), which, in terms of the particular aesthetic position that Plotinus discusses, means that “being beautiful is something else over and above good proportion and good proportion is beautiful because of something else” (I.39–41). It is in this context that the notion of “lifelikeness” or “liveliness” (*to zōtikon*) is introduced in the attempt to capture this “something else” that transcends every determinate sensible characteristic of the object, the “grace” (*charis*) or “light” (*phengos*) (*Enn.* VI.7[38].22.24) which is responsible for making the sensible form of an object lovable to its beholder.

At one level, the notion of lifelikeness operates as an aesthetic predicate, enabling us to articulate our aesthetic response to different objects, and to compare and evaluate these objects accordingly. A work of art could be considered more “lifelike”, and hence better, the more faithfully or realistically it represents the physical entity it por-

trays.<sup>14</sup> The well-known anecdote of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius illustrates this notion (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.65): Zeuxis' painting was so realistic as to deceive the birds who took his painted grapes for real and pecked at them; yet Parrhasius was the winner because he deceived Zeuxis himself, who tried to lift a curtain in order to see Parrhasius' work behind it only to realize that the curtain itself was the masterpiece. As the anecdote indicates, this notion of lifelikeness is associated with the idea of some form of deception that underlies the spectator's strong engagement with a successful work of art; given Plato's hostility towards this aspect of artistic creation, it seems unlikely that Plotinus had this in mind when praising lifelikeness.<sup>15</sup> But there are other aspects of this traditional aesthetic theme that are more congenial to Plotinus' use of the term. In some cases, the idea of a vivid artistic representation merges with that of expression: if the point of the work is to evoke a certain response in its viewer, such that the viewer would engage with the work as if it were alive, the representation should not be just "realistic" in a formal sense (if at all), but should express internal contents that can motivate and sustain this kind of engagement. As Socrates puts it in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (3.10.1–8) in the typical case of a human statue, if "the appearance of being alive (*to zōtikōn phainesthai*) is what most enchants (*psychagōgei*) people who look at statues", then "the sculptor must represent the activity of the soul in his figures" or "imitate the character of the soul", a task that goes beyond any formal or material considerations, since this character itself "has neither symmetry nor colour [...], and it is not even visible at all".

I thus claim provisionally that a "lifelike" work of art would need to have the appearance of having a soul, to intimate the presence of soul beneath its visible form, in such a way that another soul (that of the spectator) can sense or recognize an affinity

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14. For a brief overview of the presence of this theme in ancient Greek literature, see Halliwell (2002: 20–21).

15. See e.g. *Republic* 10.598b–c, where Plato claims polemically that such a deception is relevant only in the case of "children and stupid adults".

with it.<sup>16</sup> This fits with the claim, explicitly made by Plotinus (in *Enn.* I.6[1].6.25–30, quoted above in note 3), that it is the soul that makes a sensible body beautiful, by its presence (or appearance of its presence) and its beauty; it also corresponds to a conception of the soul as the principle of life, namely as the organizing and formative force behind all kinds of movements and changes we can observe in the natural world (see e.g. *Enn.* IV.7[2].9 or *Enn.* VI.2[43].6). This claim would also explain Plotinus’ account of aesthetic experience as an essentially reflective one in which, beyond any bodily pleasures or affections, the soul “sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality” and is thus “delighted and thrilled and returns to itself (*anapherei pros heautēn*) and remembers itself” (*Enn.* I.6[1].2.9–11). This enables us to elucidate the mixed way in which Plotinus uses the term from a categorical point of view, a usage that underlines the wide extension of the term “beautiful” noted earlier. If life-likeness functioned as a distinct, purely aesthetic, category, one could imagine that some statues might be more beautiful than a living human being; in more general terms, that the norms of the aesthetic semblance would be independent of the norms of the real and circumscribe an autonomous aesthetic realm. However, as the passage from *Enn.* VI.7 indicates, for Plotinus the living is always more beautiful than the dead or the artificial, presumably under the assumption of a categorical continuum in which appearing to have a soul can be compared with actually having a soul and be found ontologically inferior.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if a living face can sometimes appear beautiful and others not so, as Plotinus claims in *Enn.* I.6, the mere fact of being alive in the biological sense is not to be considered identical with being beautiful. A living being, and similarly a work of art, can be more or less attractive, or “lifelike”,

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16. This claim should not be understood in a modern sense, in which what is intimated by the work is the individual subjectivity of the artist belonging to a radically different order of being from that of the material work. Plotinus’ universe is thoroughly animated; as a result, even a stone is ensouled (see e.g. *Enn.* IV.4[28].22, 27) and the boundaries between “being made by a soul” and “having a soul” are not sharp.

17. As we shall see below, this may not be Plotinus’ last word on the potency of artificial beauty.

in different circumstances to the extent that its visible form (a) intimates more vividly the presence of soul, and (b) reveals in the appropriate way the presence of a beautiful soul, since, certainly, souls can be ugly, or less beautiful, too (see *Enn.* I.6[1].5.26–58).<sup>18</sup> In this sense, one can talk about lifelikeness as a relatively autonomous aesthetic category, measuring the extent to which the sensible form of an object in a given condition facilitates or hinders the recognition of its ensouled nature.

Since the soul itself is not visible, from a strictly empirical point of view, the recognition of a living human being would not be very different from that of a “fully” lifelike statue: in both cases, the soul of the observer (which knows itself also in other ways) has to “guess” the presence of the other soul (“sense” its affinity to it) through the evidence afforded by the sensible form of the body in front of it.<sup>19</sup> This similarity can be explained from a metaphysical point of view if we take into account Plotinus’ claim that the term “life” is not univocal, but “is used in many different senses, distinguished according to the rank of the things to which it is applied” (*Enn.* I.4[46].3.19–20). The primary sense, “the perfect, true, real life”, refers to the life lived by the Intellect; the “other lives are incomplete, traces of life, not perfect or pure and no more life than its opposite” (ll. 33–6). Now, if all these other lives are “images” (*eidōla, indalmata*) of the life of the Intellect, there is nothing in principle that prevents us from adding to this list of metaphors another entry, and talk about the “life” of a “lifelike” work of art.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Given Plotinus’ understanding of the aesthetic reaction and judgement in terms of a “fitting together” between the object and the soul (claimed in general terms in *Enn.* I.6[1].2.4–5 and specified as an agreement between the sensible or external form of the object and the mental or internal form possessed by the soul in *Enn.* I.6[1].3.1–9), the recognition of beauty presupposes also a beautiful soul on the judging side (see also *Enn.* V.5[32].12.9–12).

19. The possibility of “fully” lifelike statues had been registered in ancient Greek imagination (e.g. in the story of the Telchines, mythical workers of metal capable of creating “works of art in the likeness of beings that lived and moved” [Pindar, *Ol.* 7.52]).

20. Including, in order of rank, the life lived by the Soul as a hypostasis and the lives lived by various kinds of embodied souls, i.e. human beings, animals, plants, even “inanimate” objects like stones. As the life of the Soul is an image of the life of the Intellect, the lives of these embodied entities

The nature of this “life”, as well as our motivation for adopting this way of talking, need elaboration; but here it suffices to highlight that Plotinus’ refusal to circumscribe an aesthetic domain proper rests precisely on an “aesthetic” understanding of ordinary life. If, from a metaphysical perspective, the life of a plant and an animal are already forms of “lifelikeness”, that is, presentations of (a real, intelligible) life to be distinguished or evaluated as presentations (aesthetically) in terms of their difference in “clarity or dimness” (*tranotēti kai amydrotēti*) (*Enn.* II.3[52].9.22), we have a way to order all forms of lifelikeness in terms of their distance from real life, but we have no reason to categorically separate one kind of lifelikeness from another. In this sense, if we wish to understand what it would mean for a work of art to be lifelike, we need to ascend to the level of the Intellect and examine the (real) life it lives, in which “beauty is just beauty, because it is not in what is not beautiful” (*Enn.* VI.8[39].4.14–15).

The most vivid description of the life of the Plotinian Intellect can be found in chapter 4 of his treatise *On Intelligible Beauty*, *Enn.* V.8[31]. There are three aspects of this account that are of particular interest to the present discussion (for a broader exploration of these themes, see Beierwaltes 1985: 38–64). The first concerns the self-sufficiency of (the life of) the Intellect that underlies the idea of its perfection. Despite the Intellect’s metaphysical dependency on the One, its activity is fully self-grounded, self-directed and self-contained. As Plotinus puts it, “the thing itself is Intellect and its ground is Intellect” (*Enn.* V.8[31].4.18–19), which can be taken to mean that the Intellect is both the cause and the end of itself, capable of exercising its proper immanent activity without any kind of awareness of deficiency or lack within itself that would necessitate the recognition of something exterior to itself to be desired, sought or obtained. In this sense, “its good will not be something brought in from the

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are images of the life of the Soul (*Enn.* II.3[52].9.23; IV.3[27].10.40).

outside” (*Enn.* I.4[46].3.28–9); in contemporary terms, the Intellect contains within itself the norm of its life and activity. Second, the nature of this activity is contemplation, a purely intellectual activity that, despite the duality of a subject and object presupposed by every form of intellection, amounts to a form of self-constitution in a thorough identity between subject and object, thinking and being. The Intellect as a mind brings its intelligible objects into being, creates these objects, by thinking these; but at the same time it is nothing over and above the thinking of these objects, it is itself thinking itself (*Enn.* V.9[5].5.12–13, 7.12–13; V.3[49].5.43–7). This thinking is not of the discursive variety familiar to human beings, in which the object of thought must be sought and obtained through conceptual or argumentative elaborations (*Enn.* V.9[5].7.10–11), leading to mental chains of associations formed by “letting some things go and attending to others” (*Enn.* V.1[10].4.19). Rather it is fully intuitive, the continuous and undisturbed presence of the objects of thought (the continuous presence of the Intellect to itself), and regardless of its content and complexity, “is not composed of theorems, but one thing as a whole” (*Enn.* V.8[31].5.6–7), in which “everything and all things are clear to the inmost part of anything” (*Enn.* V.8[31].4.5), arranged, so to speak, in a transparent and unified network grasped immediately in all its distinctions and without any opaque remainders. Accordingly, this thought experiences no resistance, requires no effort, is not punctuated by distinct moments of achievement, and is thus not subject to the sequence of lack, desire, effort, achievement, pleasure, satiety. As a result, “there is a lack of satisfaction there in the sense that fullness does not cause contempt for that which has produced it: for that which sees goes on seeing still more, and, perceiving its own infinity and that of what it sees, follows its own” (*Enn.* V.8[31].4.31–3). Finally, what from a subjective point of view appears as an intuitive form of thought, from an objective point of view corresponds to a maximally unified multiplicity or diversity in which the relation between whole and parts loses any real ontological significance (as much as the whole deter-

mines the parts, the parts determine the whole) and becomes almost an inconsequential oscillation between foreground and background. Although “a different kind of being stands out in each” distinct intelligible object, “each comes only from the whole [and not from another part] and is part and whole at once: it has the appearance of a part, but a penetrating look sees the whole in it” (*Enn.* V.8[31].4.23–5; see also *Enn.* III.2[47].1.27–36).

This is the real or true life lived by the Intellect. And when Plotinus tries to sum it up, taking his cue from a phrase in Plato’s *Phaedo*, he talks about “exceedingly blessed spectators” contemplating things that “are like images seen by their own light” (*Enn.* V.8[31].4.42–4), not abstract propositions, but “beautiful images [...] images not painted but real” (5.20–24). Given what has been said about the nature of the Intellect, it should be added that images and spectators are identical, since in this case “the seer does not differ in any way from the seen” (*Enn.* V.3[49].5.4–5), despite the “distance” implied in the very notion of contemplation.

This brief presentation of the fundamental characteristics of the life of the Intellect is, I think, enough to show how productive it could be to take seriously Plotinus’ claim that a successful work of art must be lifelike and to try to understand this lifelikeness analogically on the basis of the account of the real life of the Intellect. Consider, first, the aspect of self-sufficiency. To claim that a successful work of art must be (or appear to be) self-sufficient would mean, in the most straightforward sense, that it must be a complete whole, a totality in which there is no evident lack or deficiency of any kind. Depending on the kind of art one has in mind, this requirement can be specified in a variety of ways, some of these obvious, for example, a story must have a beginning and an end, and some more subtle, for example, Socrates’ claim in the *Phaedrus* (264c) that a speech must be like a living creature. It may even be pursued in antithetical directions – for example, one direction could take us to an “aesthetics of the fragment”, in which the work of art is valued as a fragment con-

structed in such a way that allows for the imaginative reconstruction of a relevant totality, while another to a Wagnerian project of a total work of art that would result from the fusion of different forms of art. In another, perhaps less obvious sense, the requirement of self-sufficiency would mean that the work of art must be self-contained in that it would appear able to answer, as it were, all the questions or issues that it is capable of raising. Why is this shape red? Why does X die on p. 324? If, in order to respond to questions like these, one would have to go outside the work to reality or to other works, one would think that the work has failed precisely because it needs something external in order to be understood. Finally, in the most fundamental and comprehensive sense, the successful work of art must be self-sufficient in that it must appear to contain within itself the norm of itself, in the sense of establishing the point of view from which it should be appreciated or evaluated.

If we now turn our attention to the question of the formal structure of a beautiful object or a successful work of art, we are on relatively firmer ground, since Plotinus himself has drawn explicitly the implications of lifelikeness in this respect. A piece of matter or, more generally, a sensible multiplicity, becomes beautiful to the extent that, through the creative intervention of the soul (and this applies both to natural and artificial beauty), it is shaped by form: “The form, then, approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole; it brings it into a completed unity and makes it one by agreement of its parts; for since it is one itself, that which is shaped by it must also be one as far as a thing can be which is composed of many parts” (*Enn.* V.6[24].2.19–23). This passage makes clear how Plotinus understands sensible beauty (what we should strictly speaking call “beautylikeness”, beauty that exists in something that is not itself beautiful) through an analogical transference of the characteristics of the structure of the Intellect: the object must approximate as much as possible the fully unified diversity of the Intellect in which every part is the whole and the whole is each of its parts. Keeping in mind this partic-



ular aspect of the unity of the Intellect helps us understand why Plotinus is against any conception of beauty in terms of sensible form (proportion, harmony or symmetry), even if, obviously, the formative power to which the sensible material is submitted causes the emergence of such formal qualities. The problem is that a purely formal approach would inevitably locate beauty exclusively on the whole, granting it thus primacy over the parts. In such a case, the parts, obeying a principle of division of labour, would contribute to this beauty, but they need not themselves be beautiful. But if in the metaphysical background lies the idea of a structure in which every part “is part and whole at once” or the demand for a maximum and thus homogeneous unification of reality, then Plotinus can indeed claim, perhaps against the verdict of most empirically oriented aesthetic theorists, that “a beautiful whole can certainly not be composed of ugly parts; all the parts must have beauty” (*Enn.* I.6[1].I.29–30).<sup>21</sup>

Since this claim appears problematic in a variety of ways,<sup>22</sup> it may be interesting to refer briefly to the way in which the problem of the whole–part relation in a beautiful object is posed by a much later thinker, Friedrich Schiller, who, in addition to his strong philosophical commitments, has an intimate connection with artistic practice. As the *Letters on Aesthetic Education* indicate (§6), Schiller was critical of the modern principle of the division of labour in its social expression, precisely because it hinders the existence of complete and unified individuals. When faced with the corre-

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21. This strong association of beauty with unity raises the possibility that, in metaphysical terms, beauty should be located at the level of the One and not at that of the Intellect. For a good discussion of this issue, see Stern-Gillet (2000a); whether this metaphysical adjustment has any implications for sensible beauty is an issue that I cannot pursue here.

22. From a logical point of view, one could accuse Plotinus of a fallacy of division, uncritically transferring the predicate “beautiful” from the whole to the parts; from a methodological point of view, one may consider Plotinus’ claim as an example of a metaphysically motivated assertion that overlooks the relevant empirical evidence. Lloyd Gerson, in his brief discussion of Plotinus’ position in Gerson (1994: 213–14), raises some of these issues, but does not resolve them, because, although he notes that through the domination of form “the parts are brought into a unity, presumably the complex unity that is naturally understood as symmetry” (213), he does not take into account the requirement that each part must “replicate” the whole in the relevant sense.

sponding aesthetic problem, Schiller, like Plotinus, refuses to “sacrifice” the part for the whole, not in the name of a classical demand for unity, but in that of a modern demand for freedom: “Beauty ... regards all things as ends in themselves and will not permit one to serve as the purpose of another. ... Everyone is a free citizen and has the same rights as the most noble in the world of aesthetics, coercion may not take place even for the sake of the whole” (*Kallias* 170).

Schiller understands beauty as “freedom in appearance”, that is, “self-determination of a thing insofar as it is available to intuition” (*Kallias* 154); thus his refusal to “coerce” the parts corresponds to the claim that a beautiful whole cannot be made of ugly parts. On the other hand, Schiller knows that “it is necessary for every great composition that the particular restrict itself to let the whole reach its effect”; his way out of the problem is to claim that “if this restriction by the particular is at once the effect of its freedom, that is, if it posits the whole itself, the composition is beautiful” (*Kallias* 171). Notice how close Schiller’s position is to Plotinus’, given his positive conception of freedom as self-determination: in a beautiful whole, every significant part must “replicate” the whole, in the sense of appearing equally beautiful (self-determined, “containing its good in itself”, “lifelike”) with the whole. Of course, both Plotinus (*Enn.* V.9[5].2.13–14) and Schiller (*Kallias* 155) are aware that a sensible object cannot be really self-determined in this sense.

There are, in fact, several points of similarity between important themes of the modern aesthetic tradition, especially in the line originating in Kant, and the Plotinian claims we have been exploring. In the *Critique of Judgement*, one may single out the idea that the successful work of art (the work of genius) contains indeed its own norm of being, of course not ontologically or empirically, but in terms of its exemplary function as a concrete standard from which the rules that guide its appreciation must

be reflectively abstracted (§46–7).<sup>23</sup> Or one may point out that when the aesthetic experience is famously protected from the intrusion of any real (theoretical or practical) interests of the subject through the notion of a disinterested satisfaction (§2) and is grounded on the notion of a free and harmonious play of the cognitive capacities of understanding and imagination (§9), the result is an intellectual activity that “has a causality in itself, namely that of maintaining the state of the representation of the mind and the occupation of the cognitive powers without a further aim” (§12.222). Consequently, “we linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself ” (§12.222), which seems like a finite approximation of the infinite activity of the Intellect.

These points of comparison could be multiplied, and indeed show, if necessary, that even if modern aesthetics constitutes in some sense a radical break, classical themes (not necessarily elaborated as part of an aesthetics) did not suddenly disappear but may have even held key roles in the new configuration. If there is a fundamental point of continuity here, one may try to locate it in the fascination felt by an anthropological structure (call it an individual soul or a finite subject) for certain objects that display a kind of self-sufficiency (a lifelikeness) that goes against everything that can be ascertained about their reality. The extension of this set of objects changes over time (the cosmos was obviously such an object for Plotinus and the ancients, in a way that it is not for us today), as do the philosophical descriptions aiming at capturing their nature, in ways that reflect the changes in the conception of the reality

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23. The entire *Critique of Judgement* can be considered as Kant’s attempt to come to terms with these objects of our experience that appear, contrary to the ontological conditions imposed by the categorical structure of reality, to contain within themselves the norm of their constitution or activity, an “inscrutable property”, to which “perhaps one comes closer ... if one calls it an analogue of life” (§65.374). It is important to remember that the third *Critique* is a book in two parts, and, as much as it achieves the establishment of an autonomous aesthetic domain, it also brings together, under the concept of reflective judgement, all these “lifelike” sensible objects, natural and artificial, that Plotinus would consider as candidates for beauty.

against which the claims of these objects are measured or explained: from Plotinus' intelligible reality, which indeed possesses the self-sufficiency of real life, to Kant's scientific physical universe of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which nothing can really possess any kind of self-sufficiency. However, at least from Plato to Nietzsche, one can trace a line of philosophical reflection investigating the claims of these objects, and this could be called aesthetics in an appropriately broad sense.

## Artistic Creation

The previous section has given, I hope, a sense of what a successful work of art or a beautiful object is supposed to be for Plotinus, and as I tried to show, Plotinus' account has a double aspect corresponding to two senses of the term "lifelike": a sensible object that (a) attracts the soul in a certain immediate way grounded on the affinity that the soul feels for it<sup>24</sup> by (b) being unified in a certain way through the presence of form. This duality is explicitly recognized by Plotinus in a short discussion of sensible beauty in *Enn.* V.9[5]: "What then is it which makes a body beautiful? In one way it is the presence of beauty, in another the soul." However, in this passage the soul enters the picture not as the spectator, but as the artist: it is the soul that "moulded [the body] and put this particular form in it" (*Enn.* V.9[5].2.17–18). Thus, we move on to the issue of artistic creativity, an issue that concerns particularly the soul, since the soul is the proximate creator of sensible beauty in all its natural or artificial forms. What, then, distinguishes artistic creation from other forms of human practice? And, in particular, what is the value, if any, of this particular form of human creativity?

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24. "[Beauty] is something which we become aware of even at first glance; the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognises and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it" (*Enn.* I.6[1].2.2–4).

In order to tackle this issue, we need to start from Plotinus' ambivalence towards production or creation, as this is expressed in his metaphysics. Plotinus' valuation of practice, in the broad sense of any fully or partially intentional practical activity of making or doing that involves some kind of effort for the accomplishment of its objective, is generally negative, because any such activity can be motivated only by some felt lack or deficiency and is thus an index of ontological inferiority. As he puts it, talking about the Intellect's purely self-contained and perfectly transparent theoretical activity: "For what reason could it have for making, since it is deficient in nothing? ... Being able to make something by itself is the characteristic of something that is not altogether in a good state" (*Enn.* III.2[47].1.37–9; V.3[49].6.39–40, 12.33). In a philosophical system where the norm of being is unity and self-sufficiency, this valuation is to be expected. The obvious problem, then, is why reality is not exhausted in the self-sufficient intelligible world, but includes the soul, the sensible world, and everything that this world contains. In order to respond to this problem, Plotinus introduces a dynamic creative element in his ontology and incorporates it into a general principle of being: reality unfolds hierarchically, from the One, through the Intellect and the Soul, to the objects of the sensible world, because every being, both as a hypostasis and as an individual, "makes" (produces, generates) what comes ontologically after it. This natural tendency of every being "to produce what comes after it and to unfold itself" (*Enn.* IV.8[6].6.8–9) leads to a different kind of productive activity which, according to Plotinus, does not originate in lack, but is the manifestation of a plenitude of power or a state of perfection (*Enn.* V.1[10].6.38; V.4[7].1.28–9) that results from the theoretical activity of each being.<sup>25</sup> This spontaneous productive overflow does not have a global aim, but merely moves towards an eventual point of

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25. For concise descriptions of this process, see *Enn.* V.2[11].1.8–23 or V.1[10].6.40–55. The general metaphysical distinction between an "internal" (self-constitutive) and an "external" (productive) activity of each being is discussed in Schroeder (1980); Gerson (1994: 23–37); Emilsson (2007: 22–68); and, with special reference to the soul, Kalligas (2000: 31–5).

exhaustion of the original power, as it becomes diffused in its various (de)gradations (*Enn.* II.9[33].8.24–6; IV.8[6].6.13–16). However, its local effect is to generate around each creative entity a familiar environment, a familiarity that Plotinus understands in terms of the similarity between an image and its original. “The snow does not only keep its cold inside itself”; in the same way, “all existing things, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence of their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced” (*Enn.* V.1[10].6.31–34; see also *Enn.* V.4[7].1.24–42 or *Enn.* IV.3[27].10.35–6).<sup>26</sup>

With the appropriate specifications, all these points can be applied to the soul. Its creation or image, the familiar place it provides for itself in order to unfold ontologically, is, of course, the sensible world, as a whole (the universe is the creation of the cosmic soul) and severally (every sensible object is either a product of the formative action of the soul *qua* nature or an artificial creation of some individual human soul). The condition that determines the resources and the objectives of the creative project of the soul is its mediating position in the overall hierarchy of reality. Since the proper domain of the soul is the “in between” (*Enn.* III.9[13].3.15) or the “frontier” (*Enn.* IV.4[28].3.11) that separates (and unites) the intelligible and the sensible realm, souls are effectively “amphibious, compelled to live by turns the life there, and the life here” (*Enn.* IV.8[6].4.32–5), intelligible entities that nevertheless must “be able to participate in the sensible” (7.3), in order to bring them into contact and ensure that

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26. In terms of this hierarchy, a work of art is “lifelike” and yet different from an ordinary living being in the sense that “in every rational principle, its last and lowest manifestation springs from contemplation, and is contemplation in the sense of being contemplated” (*Enn.* III.8[30].3.6–7). To say that something “springs from contemplation and is contemplation” is to say that it is “lifelike”; to say that it is limited in “being contemplated” means that, as it itself cannot contemplate, it lacks the power to create, and thus cannot continue the productive chain of being. For another way of expressing the difference between works of art and living things, see *Enn.* VI.4[22].10.5–11.

“nothing is a long way off or far from anything else” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].II.22–3).<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, their task consists in shaping the sensible world in ways that reflect its intelligible origin, a task that Plotinus presents as a form of creative “translation” or “interpretation” (*hermeneutikē*):

This [cosmic] soul gives the edge of itself which borders on this [visible] sun to this [intelligible] sun, and makes a connection of it to the divine realm through the medium of itself, and acts as an interpreter of what comes from this sun to the intelligible sun and from the intelligible sun to this sun, in so far as this sun does reach the intelligible sun through soul. (*Enn.* IV.3[27].II.17–22; see also *Enn.* I.2[19].3.30)

Against this metaphysical background, we may now consider how Plotinus construes the relation between the theoretical and practical capacities and activities of human beings. Plotinus’ understanding of this relation is captured by the claims that “some wisdom makes all the things which have come into being, whether they are products of art or nature” (*Enn.* V.8[31].5.1–3) and that “action is for the sake of contemplation and vision, so that for men of action, too, contemplation is the goal” (*Enn.* III.8[30].6.1–2). In other words, practice is thoroughly subordinated to theory: every practical activity must be always conditioned and guided by the appropriate theoretical cognition, while its sole purpose is the theoretical appropriation of its product; in this sense practical activity cannot possess any independent objectives or value.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, with respect to the presence or absence of a contemplative origin of a creative instance, Plotinus distinguishes between two kinds of creative activity, which we may call the “strong” and the “weak” kinds: “Everywhere we shall find that making and action are either a weakening or a consequence of contemplation: a weakening, if the doer or maker had nothing in view beyond the thing done, a conse-

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27. The intermediate and mediating position of the soul is stressed by Plotinus throughout the *Enneads*; see e.g. *Enn.* III.6[26].14.22–4; III.9[13].3.2–3; IV.8[6].7.6–9; V.8[31].7.12–16.

28. See also *Enn.* III.8[30].7.8–10: “[the active beings] had as their goal in making, not makings or actions, but the finished object of contemplation”.

quence if he had another prior object of contemplation better than what he made” (*Enn.* III.8[30].4.40–44).

Within this framework, there are two problems we have to face with regard to artistic creativity: (1) Is the work of an artist a form of “strong” or “weak” creation, as Plotinus’ description of the latter seems to indicate?<sup>29</sup> In other words, do artists know in some sense what they are making, are they guided by some prior access to the truth of their work, or do they create their work in order to address their inability to contemplate and provide themselves with a substitute object of theoretical vision? Moreover, even if we assume that artistic creation can be a form of “strong” creation, we would have to tackle a more fundamental question: (2) What is the point of artistic practice, namely why someone who “is able to contemplate what is truly real will deliberately go after its image”? (II. 44–5).

These considerations seem to undermine the claims of artistic practice in comparison to those of theoretical activity; the case against art, as it were, becomes even stronger when we examine the issue in the perspective established by the distinction between art and nature. In this respect, Plotinus claims that “art is posterior to it [the soul *qua* “nature”], and imitates it by making dim and weak imitations, little toys of little value, using a variety of devices to create an image of nature” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].10.17–19; see also *Enn.* III.8[30].5.6–10). This claim could be understood as a criticism of art along traditional Platonic lines: if artistic creation amounts to the mere imitation of the objects of the sensible world, then its products are inferior, since they are further removed from the intelligible reality. However, it could also be understood in Plotinian terms, on the basis of the difference between the creative activity of the

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29. “Because contemplation is not enough for them, since their souls are weak and they are not able to grasp the vision sufficiently ... but still long to see it, they are carried into action, so as to see what they cannot see with their intellect. When they make something, then, it is because they want to see their object themselves and also because they want others to be aware of it and contemplate it, when their project is realised in practice as well as possible” (*Enn.* III.8[30].4.32–5).



soul *qua* cosmic soul or nature and any individual human soul. Whereas the latter will typically involve perplexity, deliberation, planning, discursive and instrumental reasoning, and effort in the actual execution, the former will be the spontaneous result of an immediately available intuitive knowledge, without “fuss” or “toil” (*Enn.* V.8[31].7.24–5).<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the question of the relative valuation of the natural versus the artistic brings us back to the issue of the relation between contemplation and practice: (3) Is nature always a “stronger” creator than art?

In response to these three questions, and in defence of artistic creativity, we should point out that Plotinus did explicitly accept the possibility of a “strong” form of artistic creation. In a well-known passage, he asserts:

But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things. For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. (*Enn.* V.8[31].1.32–41)<sup>31</sup>

This passage seems to meet several of the challenges that I have identified so far. The fundamental point is that artistic practices are acknowledged as fully legitimate elements of the domain of sensible reality and assigned equal importance with every

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30. Obviously, there are important differences between the “highest” and the “lowest” “part of the Soul of the All” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].4.28), namely the cosmic soul and the immanent soul of nature. However, there are important similarities in the form of their creative activity, captured in the formulation above and pointing to a continuity with the productive activity of the Intellect; see *Enn.* V.8[31].7; IV.4[28].11–13; IV.3[27].11.8–14; III.3[48].3.13–17; II.9[33].12.12–24.

31. This fascinating passage has generated a lot of discussion in the literature. The immediate exegetical problem concerns the identity of the one who “despises the arts”: does Plotinus have in mind some Platonists (or Gnostics or Christians) of his own time, or Plato himself? More broadly: is Plotinus’ claim a critical response to Plato’s hostile depreciation of art in the *Republic* and elsewhere? For a discussion of the issue, see Rich (1960) and Kuisma (2003: 96–131), where further references to ancient sources and scholarly literature can be found.

other natural or human activity occurring in this domain. With respect to the Platonic heritage of Plotinus, the promotion of the status enjoyed by art is made possible by the assertion that the intelligible models that guide, consciously or unconsciously, the productive activity of soul *qua* nature are available to the individual soul of the artists directly and independently of their sensory access to the empirical world. In this sense, art remains imitative in the philosophical sense in which everything except the One is imitative for Plotinus, but the artist, as in the modern conception of genius, is not condemned to the superfluous imitation of *natura naturata*, but can proceed from the same starting point occupied by *natura naturans*, since this is also a soul and “the same vision is in every soul” (*Enn.* III.8[30].5.32). One implication of this position is that, if the term “representational” denotes the art that aims to present objects as they appear in the sensible world, then, for Plotinus, art is essentially symbolic or conceptual, in the sense that it aims at presenting meanings (*noēmata*) rather than things. Despite their sensible constitution, artistic presentations are not homogeneous to their apparent objects and do not obey the norms of sensibility. Rather, and in compliance with the general creative mandate of the soul, they should be understood as “metaphors”, “translations”, “symbols” or “interpretations” of intelligible contents in sensible terms, a fact that accounts for their apparent normative self-sufficiency: Pheidias’ Zeus is to be judged in itself (in the perspective of the “metaphor” it establishes) and not in terms of human physiology. Another implication is that Plotinus’ understanding conforms to an idealistic conception of the work of art, in which the “real” work is not the external product of artistic activity (which, given its material nature, will be a defective realization of the conception of the artist), but rather the “art”, that is, the contemplative achievement, in the mind of the artist that guides the creative activity.<sup>32</sup> Finally, in this context, Plotinus can qualify his categorical denial

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32. See *Enn.* V.8[31].1.16–31, 2.14–21; III.8[30].2.10–14, 5.6–10, 22–4. In these passages, the point is presented as a corollary of the general principle that the cause is ontologically superior to the ef-

that the artificially “lifelike” can be more beautiful than the living (*Enn.* VI.7[38].22.30–32) and envisage the possibility of works of art in which the mastery of form over matter would exceed the relevant capacities of nature, resulting in a local intensification or enrichment of intelligibility, or else, a stronger “metaphorical” connection with the intelligible domain.

And yet, even if art is a “strong” form of creation, possibly even “stronger” than nature,<sup>33</sup> we are still left with the second question raised above: why someone who “is able to contemplate what is truly real will deliberately go after its image” (*Enn.* III.8[30].4.44–5). To explore this final question, I return to a passage that is generally overlooked in the relevant literature but which has preoccupied me in the past, with the intention of further elucidating its relevance to Plotinus’ aesthetics.<sup>34</sup> In this passage, Plotinus describes the activity of the mysterious “sages of old”, who appear several times in the *Enneads*:

And I think that the sages of old, those who wanted the gods to be present to them, created temples and statues by looking back at the nature of the All, having in mind that the nature of the soul is in all directions ductile, but it [the nature of soul] would be the easiest thing to receive [or retain], if one were to make something attractive to it that would be able to receive a share of it. (*Enn.* IV.3[27].II.1–8)<sup>35</sup>

In the context of the discussion so far, the evidence contained in this passage points to an understanding of the sages as artists or, given their legendary status, as exemplary artists: (a) their activity is the result of a conscious desire and decision, and hence be-

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fect: if the form in the mind of the artist is the cause of the beauty of the work, then the form will be more beautiful than the work. The resulting position is similar to that put forward by Collingwood, who claims that, “the work of art may be completely created as a thing whose place is in the artist’s mind” (Collingwood 1938: 130).

33. “Stronger” in the “local” sense indicated above; globally, the creative superiority of the cosmic soul and its immanent counterpart (“nature”) is clearly asserted by Plotinus in *Enn.* III.9[13].7.
34. For a more expanded version of what I will be summarizing here, see Vassilopoulou (2005).
35. Apart from this passage, the “sages of old” appear also in *Enn.* V.1[10].6.4, III.6[26].19 and V.8[31].6.

longs to the order of art, and not nature; (b) their aim, like Pheidias' in the passage quoted earlier, was to make the gods present to them, "gods" signifying here the "beautiful images in [the intelligible] world, of the kind which someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real" (*Enn.* V.8[31].5.20–24); (c) their project involved the creation of statues and temples; and (d) it was guided by a "looking back at the nature of the All"; that is, an attempt to appropriate reflectively the original access of the cosmic soul to the intelligible world, as a result of which the cosmic soul itself, in ordering the universe, "had constructed in the world statues of gods, dwellings of men, and other place for other creatures" (*Enn.* IV.3[27].10.27–9).

The work of these paradigmatic artists becomes possible through a fundamental characteristic of the soul: the soul is "ductile in all directions" (*pantachou ... eu-agōgon*), which should be understood in a number of active and passive registers associated with the verb *agein* (lead, carry, conduct; thus "to enchant" or *psychagōgein*, typically associated with the response to a work of art). The soul is "easily led"; but it is also a conductive medium connecting without obstructions the intelligible with the sensible realm (*Enn.* IV.3[27].11.17), it can control and lead bodies to the state it wants (l. 20), and, in particular, it can "lead things to a likeness with itself" (l. 35). In these terms, the complex undertaking of the sages can be described as follows: the sages, being souls themselves, must through their art and effort lead an object to a certain likeness with the soul ("animate" it, make it "lifelike"), so that the soul, easily led, will be attracted to it by recognizing its affinity with it, so that, in the vicinity of these objects, the gods can be present to the sages through the conductive passageway created by the intense concentration of the attracted soul.

This way of presenting artistic creation suggests a way of capturing its specificity. Within the perspective of the soul, the work of art acquires a privileged status as the only sensible object deliberately and exclusively made for the sake of the soul itself. At a first level, this means that the work of art is explicitly made in order to attract the

soul, for its pleasure or enchantment; since this is a pleasure in self-recognition, the work may be considered as soul's inanimate counterpart. Pursuing an analogy with the Intellect, we could say that the work of art constitutes the proper object of soul: in the way that the Intellect creates the intelligibles in order to live its proper life as a thinker thinking these, the soul creates the works of art in order to live its proper life as an interpreter interpreting these. This activity of interpretation sustains the life that the work of art lives, saving it from collapsing into its temporality and materiality; it also suggests another sense in which a work of art can be more "lifelike" than a living thing. The works of art, as sensible passages of the gods, are those objects in which the soul recognizes its own peculiar predicament, which is neither its involvement with matter nor the serene contemplation of the objects of the Intellect, but precisely its amphibious and self-effacing task.

On this basis, we may respond to our final question: those of us who are "able to contemplate what is truly real" can certainly "work unceasingly" on their internal statue (*Enn.* I.6[1].9.13), with the aim of visiting the gods face to face, so to speak, in their own intelligible temples and sanctuaries of *Enn.* V.1[10].6 or *Enn.* VI.9[9].11, instead of undertaking the uncertain endeavour of extending invitations to them through the creation of beautiful temples and statues of our own. But what the activity of the "sages of old" (who, as sages of a legendary past, are superior to both philosophers and artists) suggests is the possibility of a life for the soul, a human life, in which we are not forced to make a choice between thinking what we have not created (*qua* philosophers) and creating what we have not thought (*qua* artists). Going back to Danto's comments, we may thus envisage an "end" of art in which "the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity" and "the object in which the artwork consists is so irradiated by theoretical consciousness that the division between object and subject is all but overcome". In Plotinian terms, this may initially seem like a reality in which the skills of the soul as an interpreter would have become superfluous,

but it may be more appropriately considered as a reality in which the soul has fulfilled its self-effacing task of creative interpretation so well that indeed “nothing is a long way off or far from anything else” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].II.21–2), where all that matters is that “art is philosophy in action or philosophy is art in thought”.

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